



Rayni Joan: a Self-confessed Bulimic

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By Shelagh Watkins

I would like to welcome Rayni Joan, author of *The Skinny: Adventures of America's First Bulimic*. For twenty-five years – from pre-adolescence way into her mid-to-late thirties, Rayni walked around hiding what she thought was a shameful secret: she made herself throw up. For almost the whole time, she thought she was the only one in the whole world!

Shelagh: Tell us a little more about yourself, Rayni.



Rayni: I grew up as Roberta Joan Weintraub in Newburgh, New York, during the 1940s and 50s. During a critical period in the early 1970s, I was part of the Liberation News Service collective, where, for \$35 and ten free meals per week, I researched and wrote news and feature articles.

It was during this period that my feature article, *Women, Fat of the Land*, appeared widely throughout the U.S. It was June, 1970, and I became the first public confessor to the then unheard of habit of bingeing and purging, later diagnosed in the 1980s as bulimia. Although the word and the fact of "bulimia" were largely unknown at the time,

my story containing my confession was published on the front pages of dozens of alternative weekly newspapers, where it struck a chord with more than a million women readers – a chord that resonates to this day.

Although my public confession was a major turning point in my life, it nevertheless took seven more years before I managed to kick the habit completely.

I am now Director of the Center for Increased Consciousness. I live near the beach in Santa Monica, California, with my husband, writer Robert Moskowitz. We have three grown sons, wonderful daughters-in-law, and two gorgeous granddaughters. As an ordained Interfaith Minister, I enjoy officiating at weddings and other life passages.

Shelagh: When did you begin writing?

Rayni: I wrote my first story, about a lonely elephant baby, when I was five. Not a slender gazelle. Not a purring kitten or a dog with a wagging tail. A lonely elephant baby! A smart prognosticator probably could have predicted my whole life based on that!

Shelagh: Please describe some of your journey that ended with the writing of *The Skinny*.

Rayni: As someone who “tumbled up” with little real guidance, and consequently struggled with low self-esteem and an eating disorder, when I had kids, I didn’t want to make the same mistakes my parents made. (I didn’t. I made different mistakes!) At the age of sixteen, one of my sons handed me several thousand dollars and informed me he’d been playing blackjack at a casino. (He lied about his age.) Despite my pleading, he continued to play. I joined Gam-Anon, a 12-Step Program for family members of gamblers and had no luck getting him to attend Gamblers Anonymous. I spoke openly to my group about my history of bulimia, and when someone asked me whether I’d be willing to tell my own story to a large group assembly, I agreed – and my son agreed to attend.

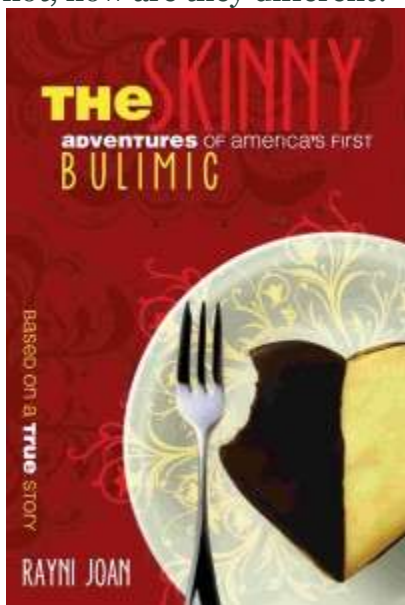
In my presentation, I talked about my childhood, about the way no-one in my family had paid attention to my throwing up, and how I wished they had stopped me. I talked about the way my therapist, whom I had trusted, had abused me. I told the group of about two hundred that the saddest thing in my life was my inability to communicate to my son the long-term harm and pain an addiction can cause. By the time I finished, after long applause, and after acknowledging those crowding around me to express their gratitude, finally, I returned to my seat. My then seventeen-year-old was in tears. He hugged me and thanked me. He said he’d had no idea what I’d been trying to tell him. The following week he wrote an article for his high school paper about his gambling addiction and his intention to end it immediately. By then, he was the school bookie, and he formally quit. He was already in therapy and continued for many years – and is now a wonderful, loving, thoughtful and supportive young husband and father.

Because sharing my truth helped a few people I touched, including my son, I had the incentive to write my slightly fictionalized story in the hope of reaching and inspiring large numbers of people to have the courage to heal.

Shelagh: Rayni, why did you fictionalize your story instead of just writing a memoir?

Rayni: Two reasons: First, I'm not a celebrity so I didn't think anyone would care about Rayni Joan's story. Second, James Frey's hoax memoir made me super sensitive to inaccuracies in my story caused by my own imagination. So I decided to write a story parallel to mine but with some changes I wouldn't have to explain to anyone.

Shelagh: Have the reactions from readers of *The Skinny* been what you anticipated? If not, how are they different?



Rayni: There seems to be no middle ground to the reactions to *The Skinny*, and that surprises me. People seem either to hate it or adore it. A (former) close friend of mine told me she would never read a book that had child abuse in it, and that surprised and also hurt me even though I have to respect her truth. Wouldn't most people want to read their friend's secret story? I would! Some readers think it's weird the way Rowie talks to angels and "guides." Others tell me the same thing is cool. I thought more people would object to the liberal use of cursing, particularly the f-word. I haven't heard that criticism. But I'm pleased that just about all readers agree that the book is well-written. I hadn't anticipated that. Also, I'm surprised that some men like the book a lot. I thought it would be only a "woman's book." It seems to contain some universal truth that strikes a chord with anyone who struggled to figure out what the hell their life was all about because they sure didn't learn it from their parents.

Shelagh: What's your favorite moment in *The Skinny*?

Rayni: I enjoy the special connection between Rowie and her piano teacher, the first real teacher in her life. Jimmy Wilson teaches Rowie far more about life than anyone

else ever did. Insecure and fearful of failure, Rowie learns from Jimmy to welcome mistakes as guides that help us to learn. He truly inspires her. It's a warm, healthy relationship.

Shelagh: Are you now finished with Rowena, or do you have plans for writing another story about her? What can you tell us about her next story?

Rayni: I'm definitely not through with her. There's a whole new trajectory I see for her – some of my personal “paths not taken” which she's eager to embark on. She's very dedicated to personal growth and has the tough job of dissolving the false self she created as a childhood defense and reinventing herself from scratch – without her dysfunctional parents to confuse her – and without the eating disorder. I'd also like to explore her development as an artist and spiritual being.

Shelagh: What do you say when people call *The Skinny* another example of “chick lit”?

Rayni: I say: “If, by chick-lit, you mean a story with no designer clothing, shoes, or accessories, but with a strong, smart woman protagonist both women and men can relate to, then OK, enjoy!”

Shelagh: Where can people find out more about you, Rayni?

Rayni: www.raynijoan.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/rayni

My Space: www.myspace.com/raynij

Follow me on Twitter: @Raynwoman